Justice, Instruction, and the Good: The Case For Public Education in Aristotle and Plato’s *Laws*

**Part III: Why Education Should Be Public And The Same For All**

RANDALL R. CURREN

*University of Rochester, Margaret Warner Graduate School of Education and Human Development*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper develops an interpretation and analysis of the arguments for public education which open Book VIII of Aristotle’s *Politics*, drawing on both the wider Aristotelian corpus and on examination of continuities with Plato’s *Laws*.

**Part III:** Sections VIII–XI examine the two arguments which Aristotle adduces in support of the claim that education should be provided through a public system. The first of these arguments concerns the need to unify society through education for friendship and the sharing of a common end. Several versions of his second argument are considered, and the most promising of them is elaborated in connection with an examination of the links between instruction and legislation in the *Laws*. This yields what is probably the most compelling argument there is for the claim that public supervision of education is a necessary condition for a just society.

**KEY WORDS:** public education, Aristotle, Plato, friendship, virtue, the common good, education and law, corrective justice, educational equality

After laying the groundwork for an interpretation of *Politics* VIII.1 in Part I of this article, I devoted Part II to an examination of the first of two pairs of arguments which Aristotle presents in that chapter. Those arguments aim to establish that education is important enough to merit the legislator’s attention, a conclusion which I described as a preliminary to the further conclusion that education should be provided through a public system. The second of Aristotle’s two pairs of arguments in VIII.1 is devoted to establishing this latter conclusion, and it is these arguments that we shall turn our attention to now in Part III. I set them out in Part I, Section II, as follows:

**The Argument From a Common End (CE)**

And since (*epei d en*) the whole city has one end, it is manifest that education should be one and the same for all, and its care (*epimeleian*) public (*koinên*) and not private – not as at present, when everyone looks after his own children separately, and gives them separate instruction of the sort which he thinks best. The training in things which are of common interest should be made the same for all (*dei ... koinên poieis-thai*). *(1337a21–27)*

**The Argument From Inseparability**

At the same time (*hama*), one ought not suppose that any of the citizens belongs to himself, for they all belong to the state, since (*gar*) each of them is a part of the state, and it is natural for (*pephuken*) the care of each part to look to (*blepein pros*) the care of the whole. *(1337a27–31)*


I shall examine the argument from a common end (CE) first, and shall consider it in relation to the argument from constitutional unity (CU), which we left off with in Part II, the argument that education is important because it is essential to unifying the state and making it into a community (Pol. II.5, 1263b37–38).

VIII. THE ARGUMENT FROM A COMMON END

Aristotle’s arguments for the importance of education are intimately connected with his arguments for its public sponsorship, and nowhere are these connections more obvious than in the case of his arguments from constitutional unity (CU) and a common end (CE). The former may be considered the culminating argument for his first conclusion, and the latter his first argument for the second conclusion, but they are linked to each other by the fact that Aristotle takes constitutional unity to consist largely of the sharing of a common end. The most efficient way ahead now, in light of this, is to analyze the two of these arguments together, by examining the cluster of ideas through which they are linked.

We began in the final section of Part II with Aristotle’s suggestion that education is the means, or primary means, through which the polis “should be united and made into a community,” and we identified friendship, and the reciprocal goodwill and trust associated with it, as a fundamental basis of unity (Pol. II.4, 1262b5–10; III.9, 1280b32–1281a2; NE 1155a23–28), alongside a shared commitment to the city’s natural end or telos of living the best or eudaimonic life (Pol. III.9, 1280b7–10; VII.8, 1328a35–36; III.3, 1276b1–2).

Aristotle is not very explicit about the ways in which friendship and commitment to this common purpose may be promoted by education, unfortunately, but we concluded that it is evidently through promoting these two things that Aristotle believes education may promote unity. To continue with this now, it makes sense to begin with the one aspect of his conception of the means for promoting friendship and a commitment to the city’s natural end which is clear, that being the central role which he assigns to the cultivation of virtue.

Education in the virtue which eudaimonia involves would promote participation in the city’s natural end, this being one distinguishable aspect of sharing in that end. And since the virtues whose exercise is essential to a citizen’s eudaimonia are necessarily socially beneficial, an education in such virtue would also promote in each citizen a wish and disposition to promote the good of the city and all its citizens. That is a second distinguishable, though for Aristotle inseparable, aspect of sharing in that common end. Taken together, then, the ability and inclination of each citizen to not only participate in the best life himself, but also assist his fellow citizens in doing so, would seem to be just what is meant by the citizens of the city sharing in the common end of living the best life. Education for virtue is education for exactly this.

We may observe, further, that unity depends upon a certain measure of trust (Pol. V.11, 1313b16–18; 1314a17–18; 1314b36 ff) and equality (Pol. VII.8, 1328a35–36), equality in virtue being both the most authoritative (III.9,